

How Saudi Crackdowns Fail to Silence Online Dissent | American Political Science Review

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January 2, 2020

Saudi Arabia has imprisoned and tortured activists, religious leaders, and journalists for voicing dissent online. This reflects a growing worldwide trend in the use of physical repression to censor online speech. In this paper, we systematically examine the consequences of imprisoning well-known Saudis for online dissent by analyzing over 300 million tweets as well as detailed Google search data from 2010 to 2017 using automated text analysis and crowd-sourced human evaluation of content. We find that repression deterred imprisoned Saudis from continuing to dissent online. However, it did not suppress dissent overall. Twitter followers of the imprisoned Saudis engaged in more online dissent, including criticizing the ruling family and calling for regime change. Repression drew public attention to arrested Saudis and their causes, and other prominent figures in Saudi Arabia were not deterred by the repression of their peers and continued to dissent online.

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